

RETURN UNDER CONSTRAINT

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Evidence from 100 Structured Interviews during Egypt's Asylum Transition and Syria's Post-2024 Transition



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Abstract

This paper examines the livelihoods, legal status, housing, education, and return intentions of Syrian refugees in Damietta Governorate, Egypt, using 100 structured interviews presented at the American University in Cairo on 26 March 2026. The analysis treats the original presentation as the primary empirical source and interprets it within a framework of constrained mobility. The case is distinctive because settlement in Damietta appears to have been shaped simultaneously by social networks and occupational matching: 84% of respondents reportedly moved directly to Damietta, including 48% who cited family or social networks, 8% Egyptian family ties, and 22% the furniture industry. The sample is heavily concentrated among refugees from Damascus and Rural Damascus, including Saqba, Douma and Hammouriyeh, creating a plausible link between pre-displacement furniture skills and Damietta's production cluster. Yet local incorporation remains precarious: employment is sharply gendered, self-employment and Syrian-owned firms dominate among those working, residence documentation is insecure, housing mobility is high, and educational continuity is a major concern. Return intentions must therefore be interpreted with caution. Although 60 respondents indicated an intention to return, 68% assessed conditions in Syria as bad or very bad; 24% already had a family member who had returned; and only 46% of those intending to return expected to go back to their original locality. The presentation further reports that 81% lacked secured housing in Syria, 93% had no expected job, and 89% lacked an assured source of revenue. The paper develops five analytical propositions: sectoral place matching, return under double constraint, administrative friction as a mobility cost, education as temporal anchoring, and the distinction between return to a country and return to a locality. The non-probability sample does not permit population-level inference, but it offers unusually granular evidence on how legal insecurity in the country of asylum and weak reintegration capacity in the country of origin can jointly shape self-initiated return.

Keywords: *Syrian refugees; Egypt; Damietta; forced migration; return migration; housing precarity; UNHCR; legal residency; gender; furniture industry*

1. Introduction

The Syrian displacement crisis entered a new phase after the fall of the former Syrian government in December 2024. Political change reopened the question of return, but the material conditions that determine whether return can be safe and sustainable - housing, livelihoods, documentation, education, public services and local security - remained highly uneven. At the same time, Egypt was undergoing a major institutional change in refugee governance. Law No. 164 of 2024 established a national asylum framework and a Permanent Committee for Refugee Affairs, while the fieldwork for this study was conducted before the new system had fully displaced the long-standing UNHCR-centered administrative architecture.

This timing gives Damietta interviews unusual analytical value. They capture refugee decision-making during a transitional interval in which the political meaning of return changed rapidly, while the practical capacities to stay in Egypt or reintegrate in Syria remained uncertain. UNHCR reported 117,364 registered Syrians in Egypt at the end of December 2025, a decline of roughly 30,500 during that year. So, the return started before Assad's ousting. By 28 February 2026, the registered Syrian population had fallen further to 107,976 registered Syrians and 15,057 case-closure requests involving around 35,151 individuals between 8 December 2024 and 28 February 2026. These data demonstrate that return had become an immediate policy issue, but file closure should not be equated mechanically with permanent or sustainable return (UNHCR, 2026).

The paper focuses on Damietta, a secondary Egyptian governorate whose economy differs substantially from Greater Cairo. Damietta was chosen because of the author's prior UN-Habitat project on local economic development there, the governorate's furniture cluster and port economy, historical and family connections with Bilad al-Sham, and the comparatively small refugee share in the local population.

The paper asks five questions: (1) Why did the surveyed Syrians settle in Damietta rather than elsewhere in Egypt? (2) How do housing, labour-market and documentation conditions structure everyday security in the city? (3) How do schooling and family formation anchor households in Egypt? (4) How do pressures in Egypt interact with housing, livelihood and service constraints in Syria to shape return intentions? and (5) How do gender and the geography of intended return complicate a simple household-level binary of 'stay' versus 'return'?

This research has been conducted in the framework of the TRACHMED project, a European Union-funded initiative on Transnational Challenges: Climate Change, Migration and Energy Insecurity in the Mediterranean.

2. Scholarly and Policy Content

2.1 Refugee governance in Egypt: from delegated asylum administration to a national system

Egypt has historically hosted refugees in urban settings rather than camps, with access to work, housing, education and services mediated by national law, informal markets, local institutions, refugee networks and UNHCR procedures. Norman (2017) characterizes this environment as one of policy ambivalence, while Hetaba, McNally and Habersky (2020) document the persistent gap between formal entitlements and the practical ability to access them. The 2022 ILO baseline study similarly shows that legal rules governing refugees' access to employment interact with a large

informal labour market and variable implementation practices; importantly for this paper, its fieldwork included Damietta as well as Giza and Alexandria (ILO, 2022).

Law No. 164 of 2024 created Egypt's first comprehensive national asylum law. For interpretation of the present fieldwork, however, the key issue is sequencing. Interviews took place while UNHCR registration and Egyptian residence procedures were still central to respondents' daily experience. The executive regulation implementing the law was issued later, by Prime Ministerial Decree No. 1568 of 2026 on 21 May 2026, with transitional provisions for existing UNHCR cards. The survey should therefore be understood as evidence of the late pre-implementation/transitional regime, not as an evaluation of the fully operational post-regulation system.

2.2 Livelihoods, informality and the Damietta comparison

Nationally, the ILO–UNHCR socio-economic profiling study provides a representative benchmark based on 2,600 working-age refugees and asylum seekers drawn from the UNHCR registry (ILO and UNHCR, 2023). Egypt-specific research also shows that Syrian refugees frequently enter employment through informal labour, entrepreneurship, co-national value chains and family businesses (Hassan, 2021; Mousa, 2024). Mahmoud's (2017) work on El-Rehab demonstrates how social and economic integration can develop through localized urban networks, while Ayoub (2017) highlights the gendered character of exile and labour-market incorporation among Syrian women in Cairo.

The most direct contemporary comparator is the 2026 CMRS/EHUB study by Sadek, Hegazy, Gheith and Mansour. That study used 46 key-informant interviews and 46 focus-group discussions across Greater Cairo, Alexandria and Damietta to analyze employment niches, informal labour, legal constraints and livelihood interventions. The Damietta survey complements it methodologically: rather than stakeholder and focus-group evidence, it provides respondent-level descriptive measures and explicitly connects livelihood conditions to return intentions. The two studies should therefore be read as complementary rather than competing evidence bases.

2.3 Return as aspiration, capability and sustainable reintegration

Return is not a single outcome. The literature distinguishes the aspiration to return, the capability to return, the voluntariness of departure, and the sustainability of post-return reintegration. Black and Gent (2006) show why a border crossing cannot by itself demonstrate sustainable return. Carling and Schewel's (2018) aspiration–ability framework further separates what migrants would like to do from what structural opportunities allow them to do. Applied to Syrian displacement, Müller-Funk and Fransen (2023) demonstrate that current return aspirations can be strongly stratified and, among economically vulnerable refugees, may function as a response to survival pressures rather than improved conditions in Syria.

This distinction is particularly important in Damietta because the interviews simultaneously record a high intention to return and deeply negative assessments of conditions in Syria. The analytical problem is therefore not to decide whether respondents 'really' want to return, but to understand how preference, pressure and capability interact.

2.4 Gender, education and household decision-making

Household-level return measures can conceal disagreement among spouses and generations. Ayoub (2017) and Diab (2026) show how gendered labour, caregiving and security concerns can reshape migration strategies, while El Halaby's (2019) research on Syrian adolescents in Egypt emphasizes the role of education and future aspirations. In Damietta interviews, the undecided

category is composed entirely of women; women are less likely to work, and respondents repeatedly cite children's schooling and mixed Egyptian–Syrian family ties as reasons not to return. These patterns make gender and education central analytical variables rather than secondary social characteristics.

2.5 Analytical framework: return under multiple constraints

The paper conceptualizes return intention as the outcome of five interacting domains. The framework is descriptive rather than causal: the survey size and sampling design do not support structural estimation, but the domains organize the mechanisms visible in the data.

Domain	Indicative mechanisms in the Damietta survey	Expected relevance
Pressures of staying in Egypt	Residence insecurity; fear of arrest/deportation; high rent; low earnings; reported humiliation or mistreatment	Can increase desire to leave even when Syria is assessed negatively
Anchors in Egypt	Work/business, family and social networks, Egyptian spouses/children, schooling and university trajectories	Can make departure costly and delay return
Attractions of return	Attachment to country, family reunification, identity and the wish to rebuild life in Syria	Can sustain return aspiration despite material risks
Reintegration capability in Syria	Housing, job, revenue, services, education, security, documentation	Determines whether an intended return is feasible and sustainable
Cross-cutting moderators	Gender, household composition, place of origin, occupational skills, legal status, duration of stay	Shape how the same pressures are experienced by different respondents

Table 1. Indicative mechanisms of return constraints.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Study Design

The primary empirical material consists of 100 structured interviews with adult Syrian respondents in Damietta Governorate, 58 women and 42 men, a mean respondent age of 41 years, predominantly married respondents, 14 women heads of family, a mean family size of 4.6 persons, a mean of 2.3 children under 18, and 81% of families with at least one minor child. 82% of respondents lived in New Damietta at the time of the survey. The remaining 18% were distributed across Old Damietta (6%), Gamasa (5%), Faraskour (3%), Ras El Bar (2%), and Kafr El Batikh (1%). The fieldwork was performed during February and March 2026.

The questionnaire covered migration trajectory, reasons for choosing Egypt and Damietta, housing, work, legal documentation, return preferences, conditions anticipated in Syria, education and administrative procedures. It also included open-ended material from which respondent quotations were selected. The evidence is therefore best described as a structured descriptive survey with embedded qualitative testimony.

3.2 Data Collection Instrument

The sample was purposive and network-based rather than probabilistic. The earlier narrative report describes recruitment through community networks, key informants, snowball referral and UNHCR-related channels where accessible. Because inclusion probabilities are unknown, percentages describe the surveyed respondents and should not be generalized statistically to all Syrians in Damietta or Egypt. The high concentration in New Damietta and among respondents from Rural Damascus may reflect real settlement patterns, recruitment networks, or both.

3.3 Unit of analysis and multiple responses

The respondent is the primary observational unit. Some variables refer to households (rent, family composition, residential moves), while others refer to the individual respondent (employment, legal documents, return preference). Multiple-response questions — notably reasons for leaving Egypt and anticipated problems in Syria — must be labelled explicitly because their percentages can exceed 100%.

3.4 Unit of analysis and multiple responses

The 100 households surveyed encompass families at various life stages. Table 1 summarizes the key demographic indicators

Indicator	Value
Number of surveys	100 households
Gender of respondent	58% women, 42% men
Average age of respondent	41 years
Marital status (married)	87%
Women heads of household	12
Average household size	4.6 persons
Average number of children <18	2.3
Households with ≥1 minor child	81%
Children born in Egypt	110 / 182 (60% of all households' children)

Table 2. Key demographic characteristics of surveyed households.

4. Findings

4.1 A long-settled, family-based refugee sample

The age and family profile indicates protracted rather than recent displacement. Respondents average 41 years of age and most reportedly fled Syria while in their twenties or early thirties. Sixty-seven respondents arrived in Egypt in 2012–2013 alone. By the time of interview, many households had therefore accumulated more than a decade of social, occupational and educational ties in Egypt. Among the total of 182 children accounted for in the 100 households, 110 children were born in Egypt.

The high proportion of married respondents (87%) and households with minor children (81%) underscores the overwhelmingly family-based nature of this refugee community. Twelve women are classified as heads of household, typically in cases where the male partner has been deported, has remained in Syria, or has died. The six largest households comprise eight members each.

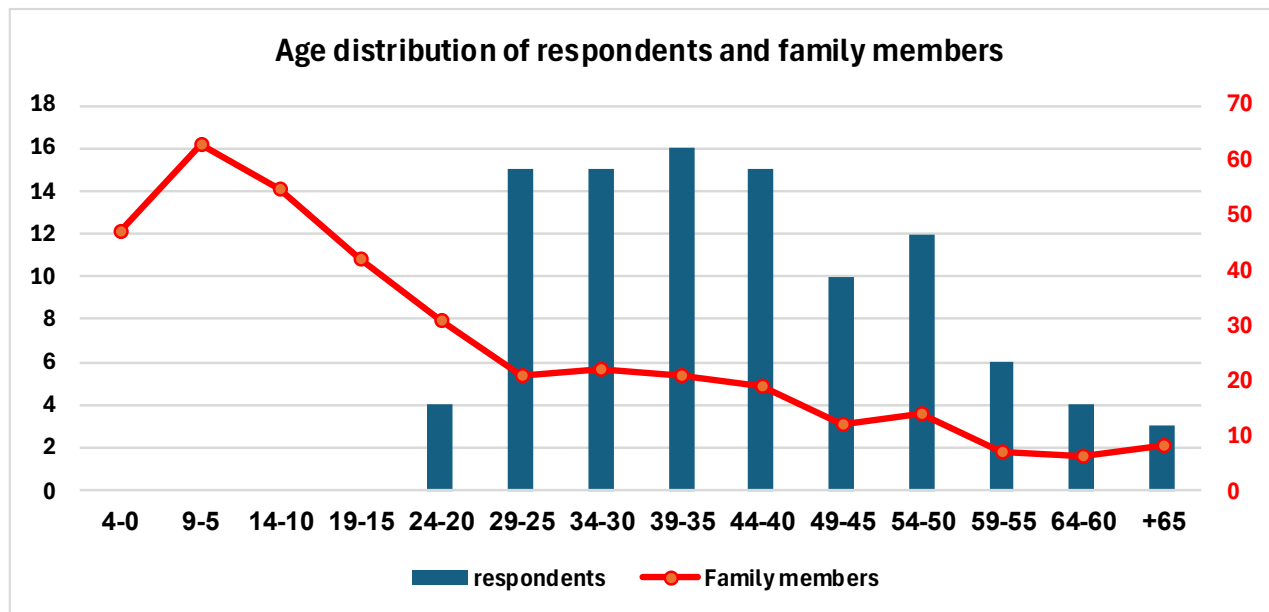


Figure 1. Age distribution of respondents and recorded family members.

Figure 1 illustrates the age distribution. Adult respondents peak in the 35–44 age cohort, consistent with families that fled Syria primarily during the 2012–2013 escalation of violence, when most were in their twenties. The family member distribution is notably younger, reflecting both the children born in Egypt (60% of the 182 family members) and the household dependents who arrived later.

A striking 67% of households arrived in Egypt at a very early stage of the Syrian conflict — predominantly in 2012 (39 households) and 2013 (28 households), as shown in Figure 2. Subsequent waves correlate with specific events: the 2021 mini wave (6 households) reflects displacement caused by ongoing military operations in the Damascus periphery. Only two households arrived in 2024.

4.2 Why Egypt, and why Damietta? Networks plus occupational matching

The route to Egypt was often direct: 67% reportedly flew from Beirut to Egypt, while 20% transited through Sudan and 10% through Jordan; 14% had previously tried asylum in Jordan or Lebanon. One family spent an intermediate year in Libya. Destination choice was social as much as economic: 47% cited social reasons for choosing Egypt, including 12% with Egyptian family connections; 26% described Egypt as their only available alternative; and 23% cited affinity with the country.

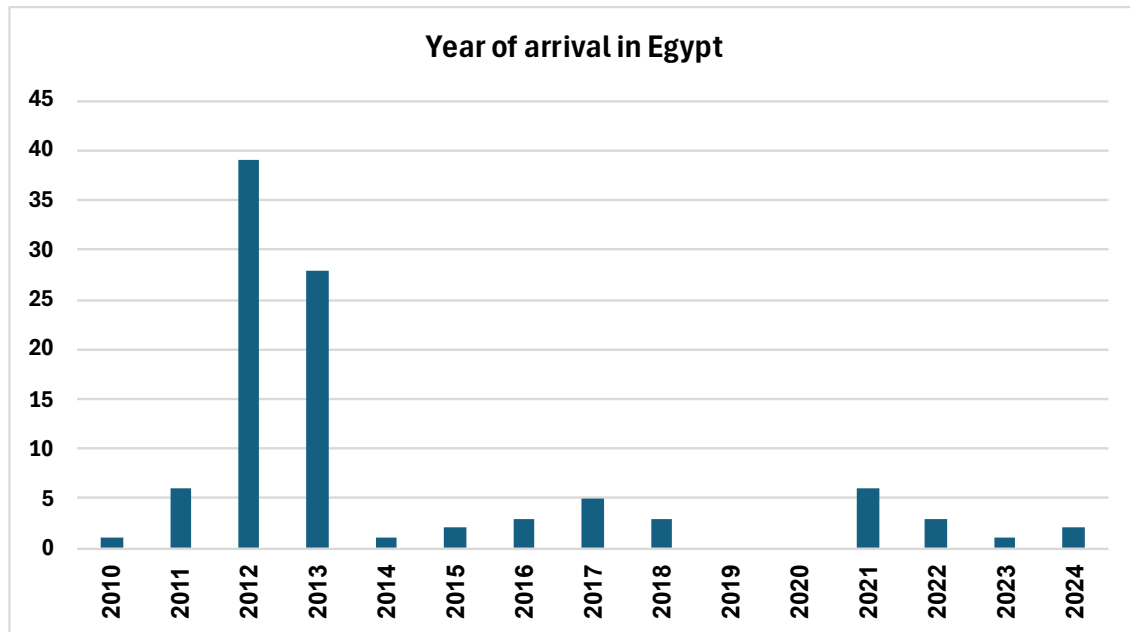


Figure 2. Reported year of arrival of respondents in Egypt.

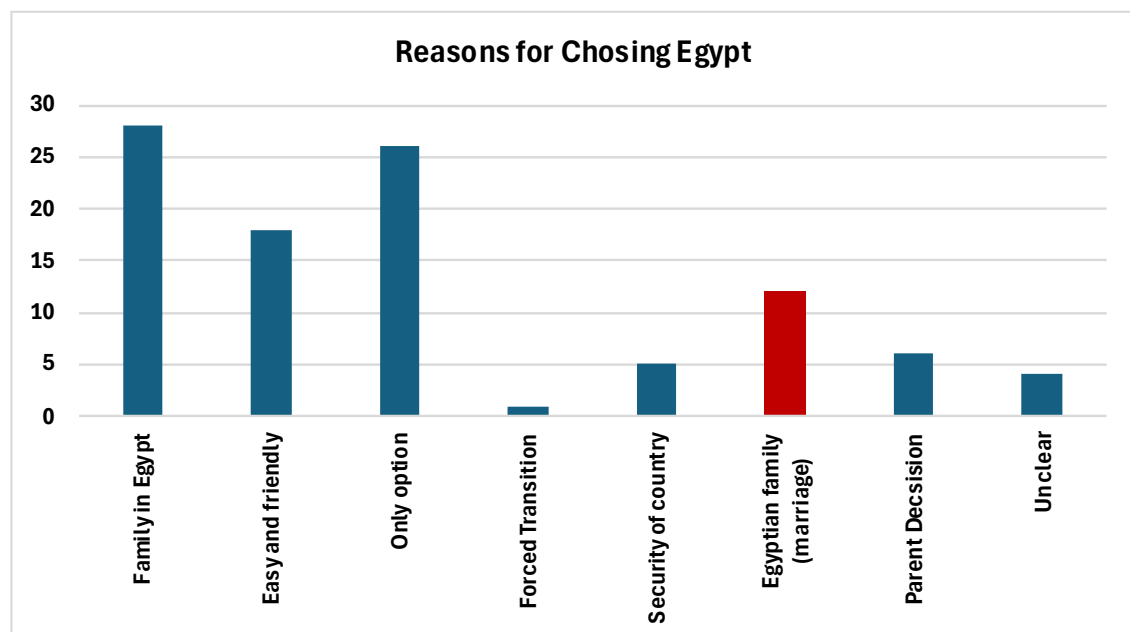


Figure 3. Reasons of respondents for choosing Egypt as country of asylum

The more distinctive result concerns Damietta itself. Eighty-four respondents reportedly moved directly to Damietta rather than first settling elsewhere in Egypt. The reasons are revealing: 48% cite family or social networks, 8% Egyptian family ties, 22% the furniture industry, and 6% lower cost.

These categories come to 84% of the full sample and therefore account for those who moved directly to Damietta. This constitutes strong evidence for the paper's 'sectoral place matching' argument.

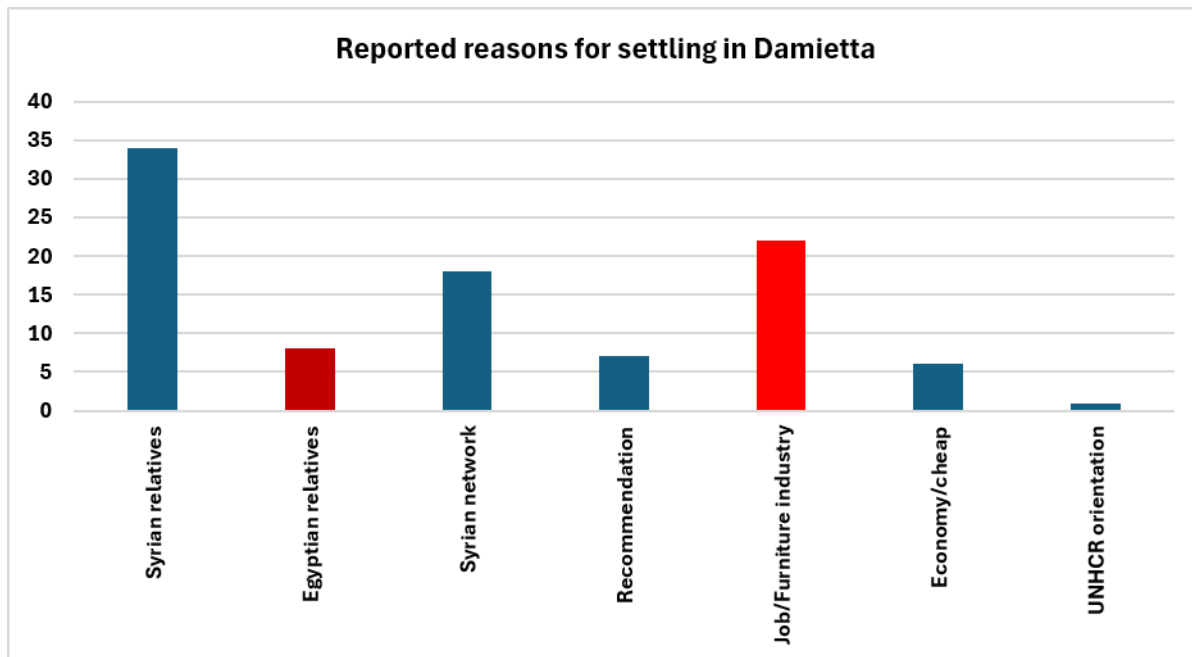


Figure 4. Reported reasons for settling directly in Damietta

4.3 Origin, conflict exposure and the Saqba–Damietta connection

Sixty-eight per cent of respondents originate from Damascus and its peripheries. Saqba alone accounts for 15%, Douma for 8% and Hammouriyyeh for 7%; another 9% come from Homs. Saqba, Douma and Hammouriyyeh are knowledgeable furniture-producing localities in Syrian that experienced fighting and heavy damage during the conflict. Their housing stock was substantially damaged. This concentration does not prove that the furniture sector caused migration to Damietta, but when combined with the 22% who explicitly cited the Damietta furniture industry as their reason for settlement, it supports a plausible mechanism of occupational continuity across displacement.

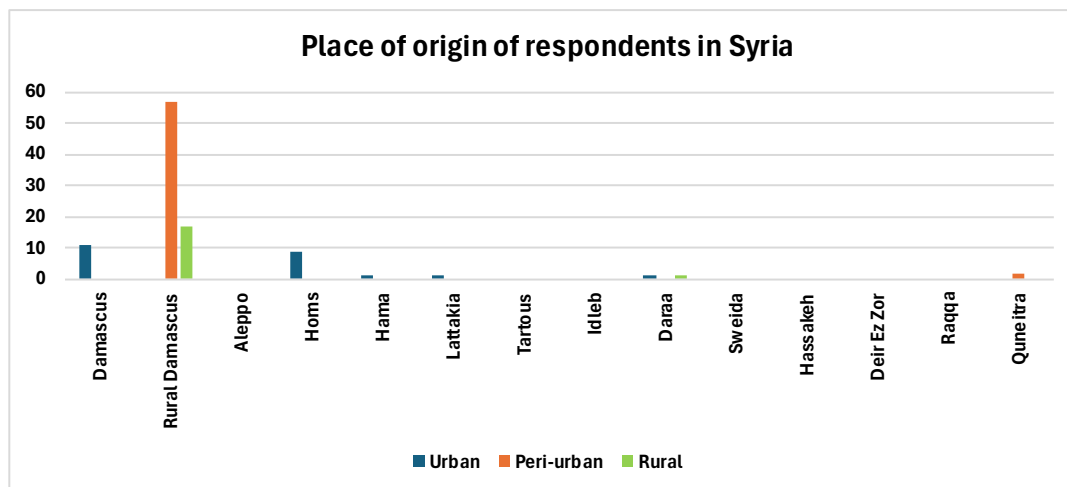


Figure 5. Place of origin in Syria.

Reasons for leaving Syria remain overwhelmingly conflict-related: 64% cite war and bombardment, 18% direct persecution, 9% military-service evasion and 5% family reasons, including some reported cases of family violence.

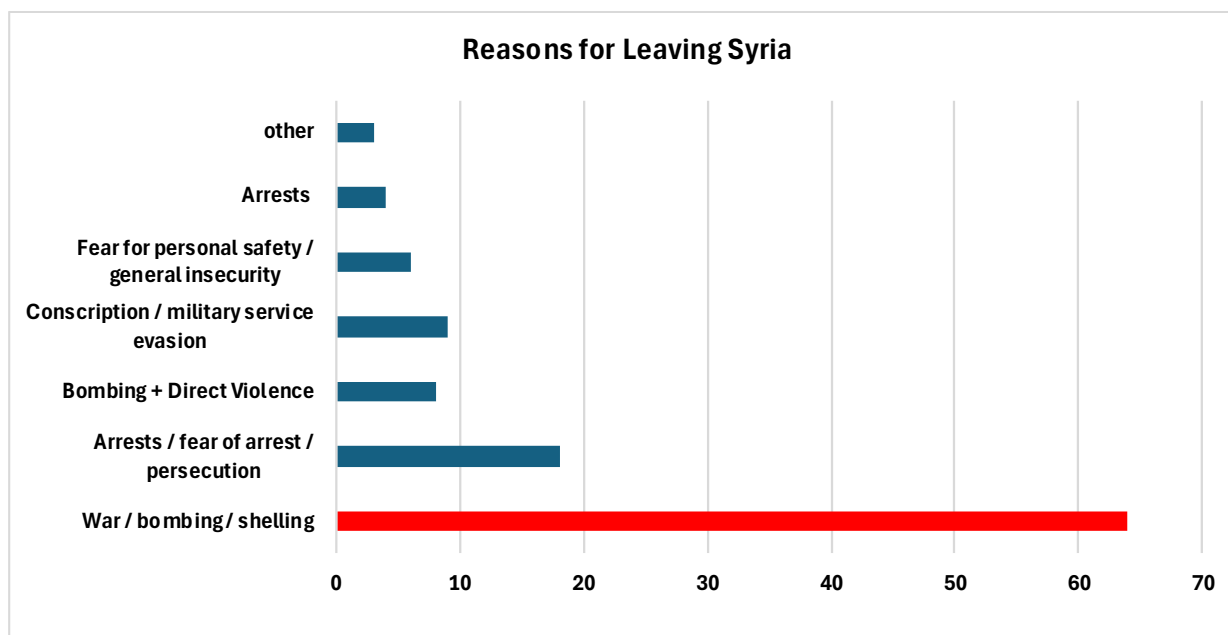


Figure 6. Reasons for leaving Syria.

4.4 Housing: apartment residence, ownership for a minority, and repeated displacement within Damietta

99% of respondents live in apartment buildings; it does not state that 99% rent. Ten per cent reportedly own their apartments, while one case is described as living on a rooftop. Average occupancy is 4.5 persons per apartment, rising to seven persons in 8% of cases.

Average monthly rent is reported at EGP 4,468, with a range from EGP 2,000 to EGP 8,000. The rent is often reported as above half of revenue. The comparison of mean rent with the mean individual salary of EGP 6,600 yields a ratio of about 68%, but this should not be described as a household rent-to-income ratio unless household income is available. The more robust result is residential instability: only 7% never moved, more than 75% moved at least three times, and 17% moved at least six times. Respondents identify sudden rent increases as a principal trigger.

Cheaper apartments are generally outside New Damietta. This produces a spatial trade-off between affordable housing and proximity to the furniture-related labour market and established Syrian networks. Housing precarity is therefore not only a cost problem; it is also a question of urban accessibility.

Despite significant turnover, 25% of households report ongoing housing problems at the time of the survey. The most common complaints are unaffordable rent increases, poor conditions, and — particularly for women — neighbors' harassment and security incidents.

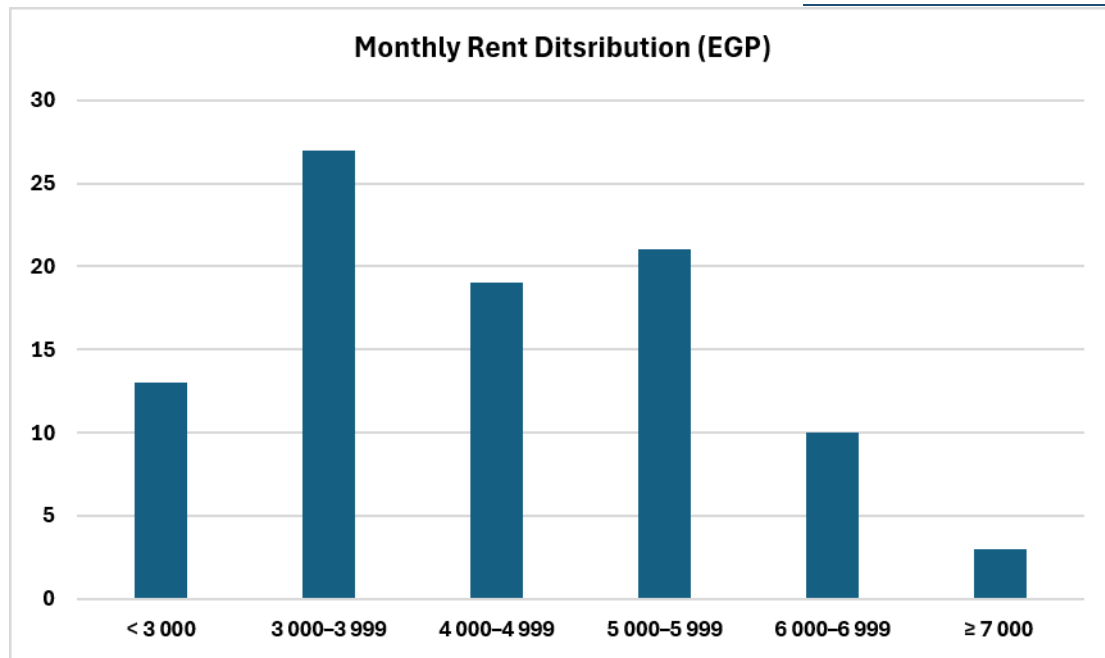


Figure 7. Monthly rent distribution (EGP).

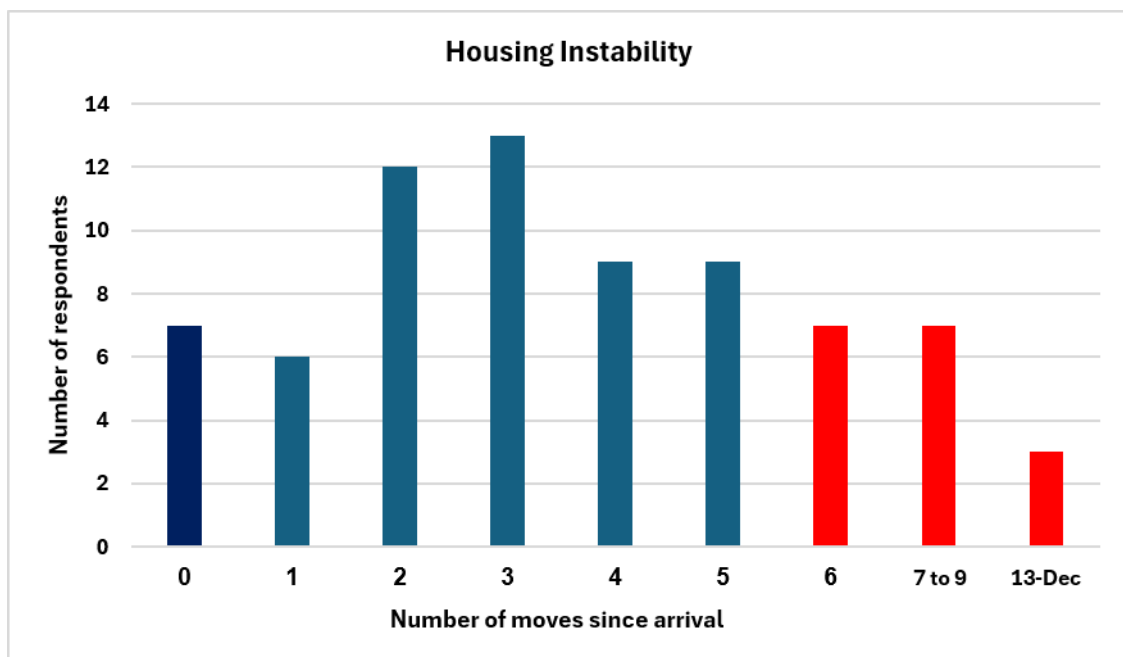


Figure 8. Number of moves since arrival in Egypt.

4.5 Employment: occupational continuity with strong gender segmentation

Employment is highly gendered. Sixty-four per cent of men and 21% of women are reported as working; 5% had worked but stopped because of health problems, business failure or other reasons. Women who work are concentrated in informal home-based activity and education, while all respondents' family members working in furniture are men. Before displacement, 77% of men and 31% of women reportedly worked in Syria, and 45% of men worked in furniture and crafts.

Among those currently working, 48% are self-employed, 32% work for Syrian employers, and only 19% for Egyptian employers. The pattern is consistent with wider Egyptian evidence on informal labour and co-national entrepreneurship (Hassan, 2021; ILO and UNHCR, 2023; Mousa, 2024). Yet the interviews describe work in Egypt as "almost as in Syria, but with disqualification", suggesting that occupational continuity can coexist with downward mobility or underutilization of skills.

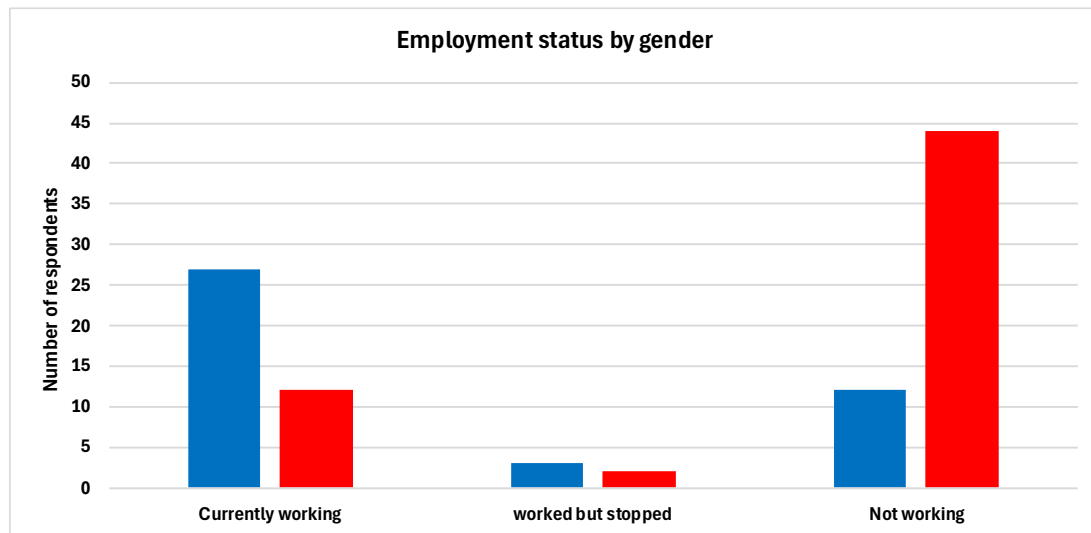


Figure 9. Employment status by gender.

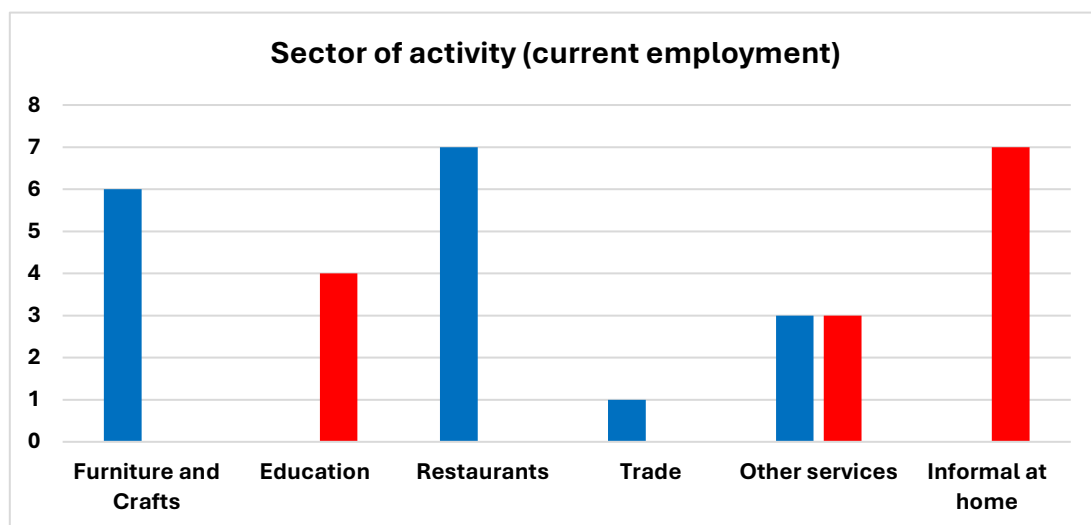


Figure 10. Sector of current employment by gender.

Employer type	Share of working respondents
Egyptian employer	19%
Syrian employer	32%
Self-employed	48%

Other	1%
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Table 3. Employment relations among working respondents.

4.6 Legal documentation: insecurity, procedural distance and perceived exposure to enforcement

Legal precarity is among the most destabilizing dimensions of refugee life in Damietta. The interviews report that only 35% held a valid Egyptian residence permit at the time of interview; 23% were awaiting renewal after expiry, 32% had no permit, and 10% had had a permit revoked. Separately, 82% had been registered with UNHCR (procedures to be completed on 6th October in Cairo), among which 21% reported as having had their UNHCR registration cancelled.

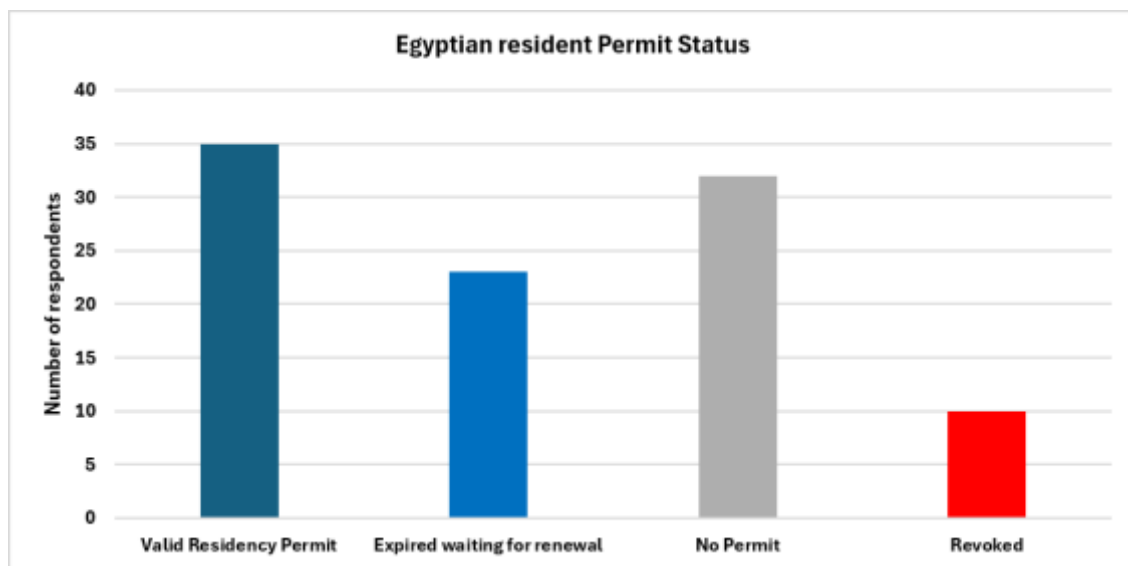


Figure 11. Egyptian residency permit status.

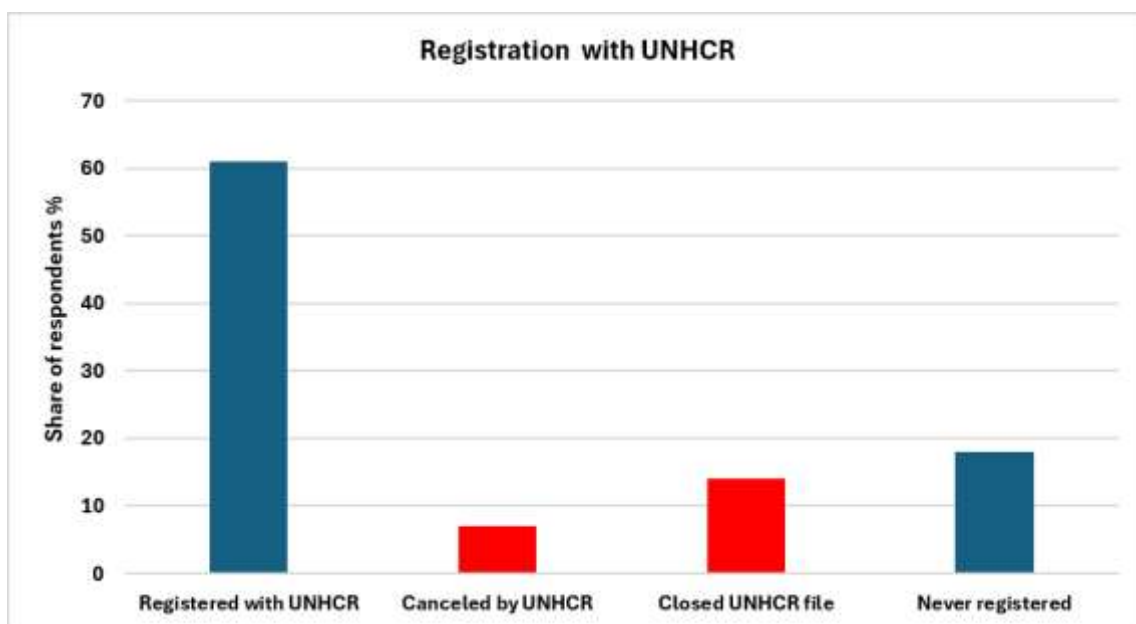


Figure 12. Registration with UNHCR.

Not all of those who have registered with UNHCR have completed the procedures to get the Egyptian residency permit, which necessitates another displacement to Cairo ('Abbassiyah), thus relying primarily on a UNHCR yellow card. Also, part of those who had not registered with UNHCR obtained other types of residencies permits: 4% investment or 8% student (Wafeden) or even 2% tourist.

It is worth noting that the legal architecture of refugee status in Egypt has evolved in ways that compound rather than reduce vulnerability. The UNHCR yellow card - never designed as a primary form of identification or residence authorization - has become, by default, the primary document for a large share of Syrians. Its procedural deficiencies (appointment backlogs, arbitrary cancellation, physical inaccessibility) generate a permanent state of semi-legality that inhibits employment, housing security, banking access, and free movement.

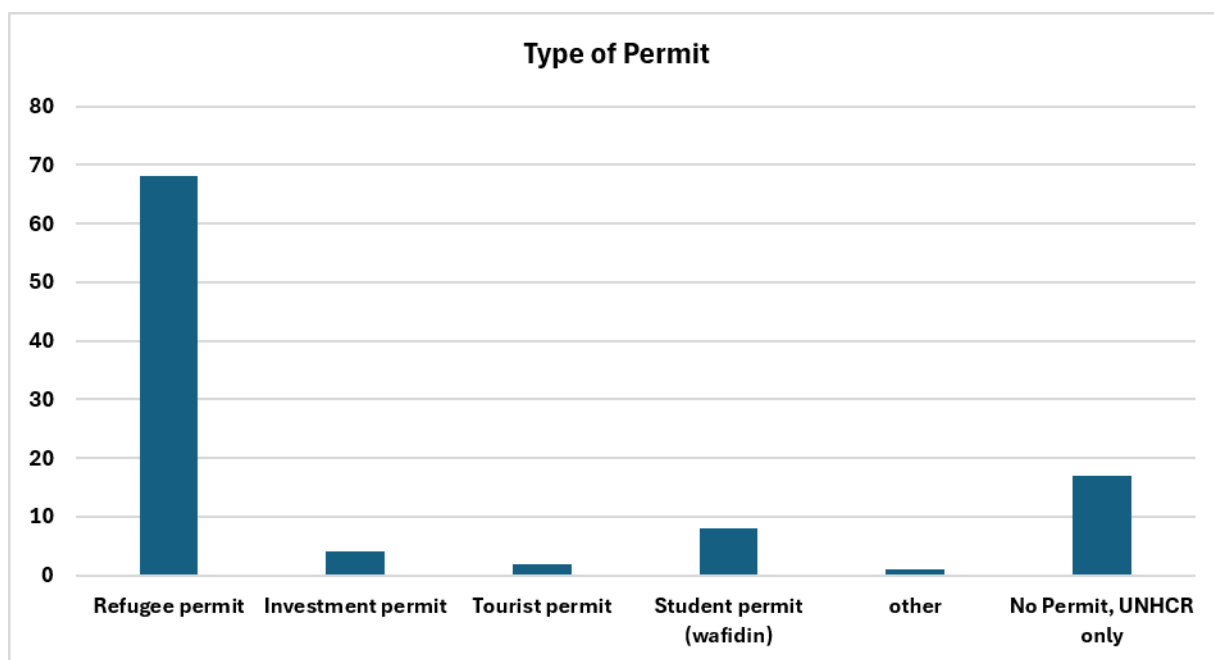


Figure 13. Type of permits of respondents.

Survey respondents express severe frustration with UNHCR procedures. Open-ended responses describe long appointment delays (permit renewal appointments are reportedly scheduled as far out as 2028), the distance and cost of travel to 6th of October City, uncertainty over file cancellation, humiliations and degrading treatments, perceived corruption and favoritism, and fear of arrest and deportation. The following verbatim testimonies are illustrative:

"We are leaving because of the arrests and deportations. I am afraid for my husband." (Female respondent, Damietta)

"I have had enough humiliation. The officials treat us like criminals. We are not criminals!" (Female respondent, New Damietta).

These results and statements corroborate and extend recent literature on the "collapse of protection" for refugees in Egypt (RPE and EIPR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2026). Forced deportations, often with no regard for the status of pending renewals, generate a generalized fear that distorts all other aspects of refugee life in Egypt.

These accounts matter analytically because perceived legal insecurity can shape employment, mobility, service use, and return decisions even where individual allegations are not independently verified. Two respondents reported deportation cases, including one involving a son reportedly deported shortly before a scheduled renewal appointment, and the other case of deportation of a young man with a valid residency permit.

4.7 Return intentions: high stated return alongside negative assessments of Syria

The internally coherent return distribution is 60 respondents intending to return, 29 not intending to return, 10 undecided, and one case reported as forced return.

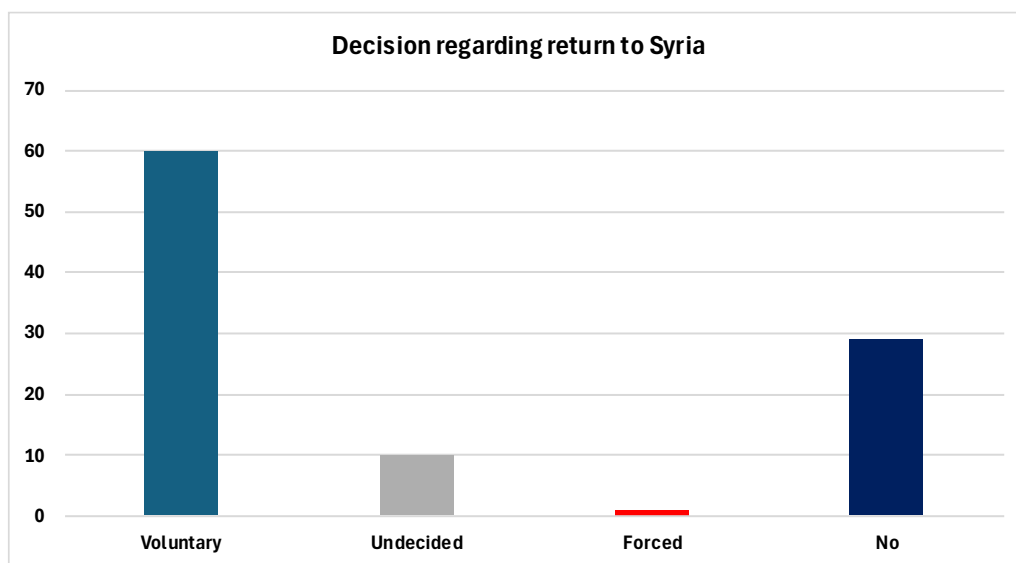


Figure 14. Stated decision regarding return to Syria.

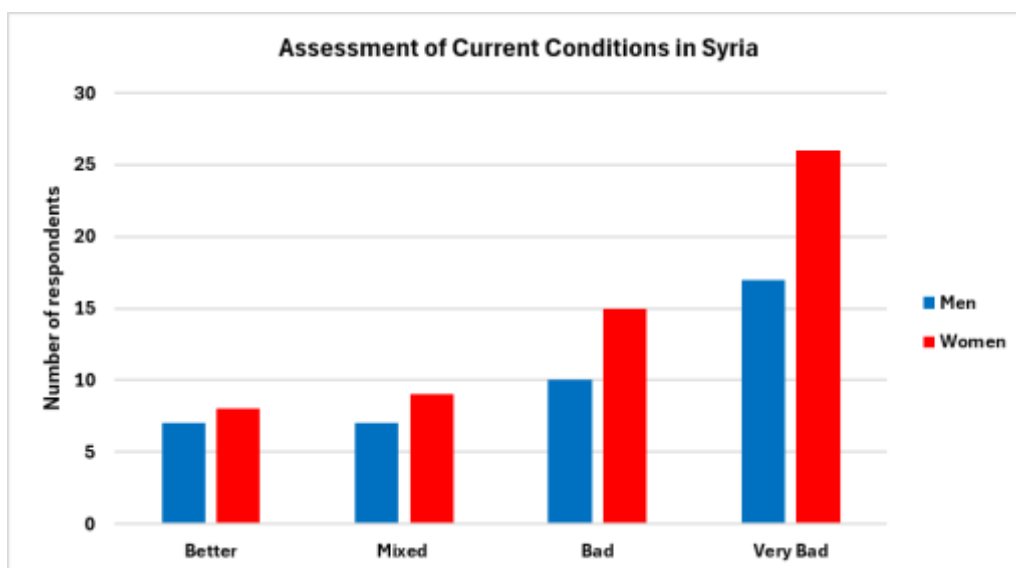


Figure 15. Assessment of current conditions in Syria, by gender.

The 60% figure should not be read as evidence that conditions for voluntary repatriation are satisfied. 65% of male respondents assess conditions in Syria as bad or very bad, compared to 71% of women. This may reflect pressure to return rather than simple optimism about Syria.

Gender differences are pronounced. All respondents in the undecided group are women, and women reported having stronger ties to Egypt. Those intending to return frequently describe being driven not by positive conditions in Syria, but by the growing untenability of conditions in Egypt. This is consistent with the broader evidence on women's weaker formal labour-market position but stronger exposure to children's schooling, caregiving and family integration. It also reinforces the methodological point that a single household respondent cannot automatically be treated as expressing a unified family preference.

Among those not wishing to return, the leading reason is lack of housing (62%), followed by children's ongoing education in Egypt (41%), and mixed marriages with Egyptian spouses or Egyptian-born children (28%). For the undecided, the dominant concerns are uncertainty about Syria's political future (70%), unclear housing prospects (40%), and unclear educational continuity for children (30%).

4.8 Push factors in Egypt and the return-capability gap in Syria

The interviews provide unusually clear evidence that return intention is simultaneously shaped by attachment to Syria and deteriorating conditions of stay in Egypt. Among the reasons cited for leaving Egypt, 48% cite residence problems or fear of arrest/deportation, 32% cite economic hardship, and 18% cite humiliation or mistreatment; 58% also express the view that Syria is ultimately their country. Because this was a multiple-response item, these proportions are not mutually exclusive.

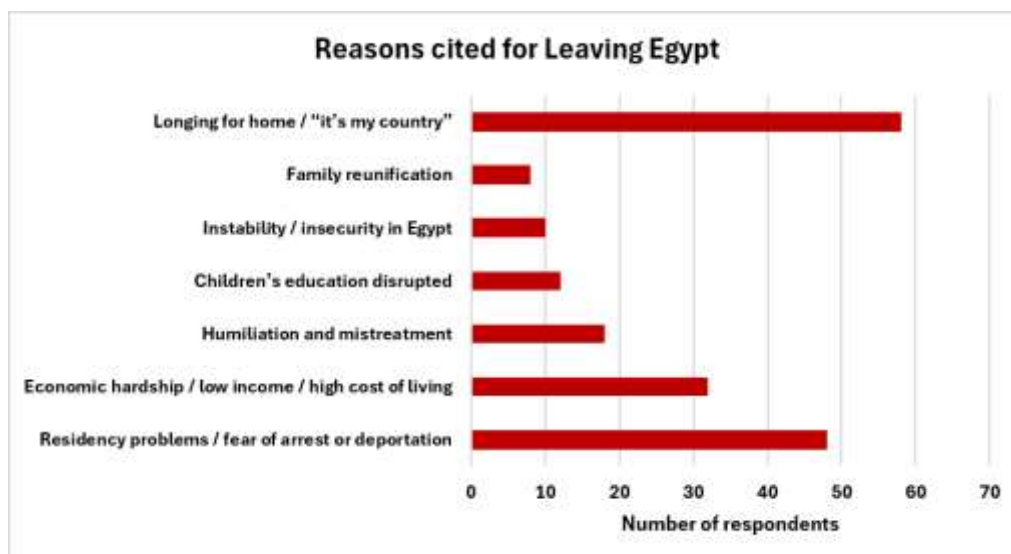


Figure 16. Reasons cited for leaving Egypt.

On the Syria side, housing, unemployment, and the cost and availability of basic services dominate anticipated problems. More direct preparedness indicators are even more revealing: 81% are reported to have no secured housing in Syria, 93% no expected job, and 89% no assured revenue; 58% expect schooling to be available for their children, although quality is questioned. These figures describe a severe gap between aspiration and reintegration capability.

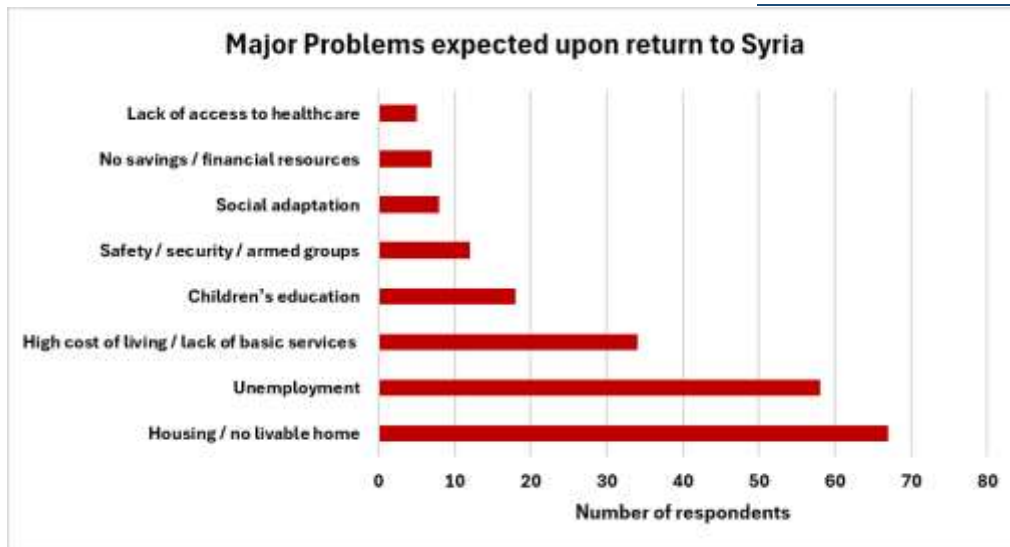


Figure 16. Major problems expected upon return to Syria.

4.9 Return is not necessarily return to the locality of origin

A major finding is that only 46% of those who wish to return say they will go to their original locality. This matters conceptually. "Return to Syria" is not synonymous with restoration of the pre-war home. Respondents originate disproportionately from heavily damaged localities such as Jobar, Daraya and Saqba; family support, public services or employment may be available elsewhere. Return can therefore entail internal relocation, a new urban destination or continued dependence on relatives rather than literal homecoming.

The results also show that 24% of respondents already have at least one family member who returned to Syria. This suggests that return decisions are embedded in transnational household strategies and information networks: earlier returnees can provide information, housing or support, but they can also transmit negative evidence about security, services and livelihoods. A longitudinal follow-up should therefore measure not only whether people return, but where they return and whether the location changes after arrival.

4.10 Education as temporal anchoring and a source of immobility

57% of surveyed families are reported as having children in Damietta schools and 15% as having young people at university. One-third of families reportedly face school problems in Egypt, and 13% have children who dropped out or were unable to enroll. Respondents describe cases ranging from young children out of school to university students close to graduation. They also report discrimination or an "anti-Syrian climate" in some schools; this should be presented as respondent perception rather than an independently established prevalence measure.

The Wafeden platform and university fees are described as major burdens. The interviews report a case of EGP 15,000 paid for an application that was refused without explanation and cite university fees in the range of USD 1,200–2,000, and more, representing significant debts on families. Such values require official verification¹; analytically, however, the interviews clearly show that education costs and academic timing affect both the ability to stay and the timing of return.

¹ Refugees registered with UNHCR who do not hold a discounted nationality must apply through the Central Administration for International Students (Wafeden). They are subject to standard international fees (USD 3,500 – 8,000/year depending on faculty, plus the one-time USD1,500 USD enrollment fee). Historically Syrian students paid

Education therefore creates what can be termed temporal anchoring: even households that favor eventual return may rationally postpone departure until the end of a school year, a degree, or a critical transition point. This helps explain why return intention, timing, and actual movement should be measured separately.

4.11 Administrative friction and the cost of exit

Return is not a simple travel decision. There is a chain of administrative steps in Egypt necessitating UNHCR file closure, with travel to 6th of October City, separation of files for family members who are not returning, waiting 4 or 5 months for a Ministry of Foreign Affairs letter, procedures at Abbassiyah (residency authorities that fix the date of departure, keeping passports until then²), passport or circulation-paper requirements, and education records³ (to enable continuation of education in Syria). Each of these steps is time-consuming and involves fees and costs.

Other steps are also necessary at the Syrian embassy in Cairo: passport renewal (US\$ 200-300) or a circulation paper against paying fines (US\$ 50).

The analytical mechanism is clear: administrative friction consumes time and savings, raises the cost of coordination within families, and can shape the timing and perceived voluntariness of departure.

4.12 Illustrative testimony: mechanisms behind the percentages

Short quotations that help identify the mechanisms behind return and non-return. They are illustrative rather than representative:

Mechanism	Illustrative testimony
Attachment to Egypt + legal fear	<i>"Egyptians are like brothers. I would stay if I could. I have friends here, I have work. But I cannot live in fear."</i>
Residency permit pressures in Egypt	<i>"We are leaving because of the arrests and deportations. I am afraid for my husband"</i>
Economic pressure	<i>"We cannot pay rent anymore. We have no savings. Here we are dying slowly; at least in Syria we will be in our own country."</i>
National attachment	<i>"Syria is my country. I don't care if it's hard — it's my home."</i>
Destroyed housing	<i>"My house is rubble. I will have to stay with my brother, 14 people in two rooms."</i>
Educational anchoring	<i>"My daughter is in her last year of university. I cannot take her away now. After she graduates, maybe we will think about it."</i>
Family integration in Egypt	<i>"My husband is Egyptian; my children are Egyptian. My life is here."</i>

local Egyptian rates in EGP, but current regulations classify Syrian applicants under standard non-Egyptian USD rates unless specific waiver.

² Or paying exit fees of USD 65 per family member for expedited departure (15 days).

³ University transcript files are reported costing USD 1,200–1,500 in administrative fees plus USD 50 per document

5. Discussion

5.1 Sectoral place matching in a secondary city

The strongest contribution of the Damietta case is not simply that Syrians found work in furniture. It is that settlement location appears to be selected through an interaction between social networks and a geographically specific production cluster. The 22% who cite the furniture industry as a reason for choosing Damietta, combined with the concentration of respondents from Saqba, Douma and Hammouriyeh, gives empirical substance to the concept of sectoral place matching. Refugees may settle where pre-existing skills can be converted into income even when national protection institutions are concentrated elsewhere.

This mechanism also has limits. The niche is overwhelmingly male, current employment is often self-employment or co-national employment, and respondents themselves report "disqualification". Sectoral matching is therefore better understood as selective incorporation than as full labour-market integration.

5.2 Return under double constraint

The investigation supports a "double constraint" interpretation. On the Egyptian side, residence insecurity, rent, weak earnings and perceived mistreatment can increase the urgency of leaving. On the Syrian side, the absence of housing, jobs, revenue and reliable services reduces the capability to return sustainably. A respondent can therefore have a strong return intention while simultaneously judging Syria to be in bad condition. These positions are not contradictory; they are produced by a constrained opportunity structure.

This is why the original figure label "voluntary return" should be replaced in analytical prose by "stated intention to return". Voluntariness is a property of the decision-making environment, not merely the absence of physical escort across a border. A self-initiated departure can still be shaped by legal insecurity or the inability to maintain a viable life in the country of asylum.

5.3 Administrative friction as a mobility cost

The study makes visible a dimension often underdeveloped in return research: the administrative production of mobility costs. Documents, appointments, travel to offices, file closure, school records and fees consume scarce resources before a family has even reached Syria. These costs are particularly consequential for households with low savings or members who do not share the same return plan. Administrative simplification is therefore not merely a service-delivery improvement; it can alter the feasible set of migration choices.

5.4 Education as path dependence

Education creates long-term path dependence. A child born or raised in Egypt accumulates curriculum-specific schooling, peer relations and credentials; a university student close to graduation has a strong reason to delay departure even if the family eventually prefers Syria. Conversely, high fees or enrolment barriers in Egypt can push families toward departure. Education is therefore capable of anchoring and expelling at the same time, depending on access, cost and timing.

5.5 The geography of return: country, locality and secondary displacement

The finding that only 46% of prospective returnees plan to return to their original locality changes the interpretation of "return". The relevant spatial outcome is not binary exile/home. It may involve return to Syria but relocation to another city, staying with relatives, or moving to a locality with better housing and jobs. Future research should distinguish country return; locality return and post-return secondary displacement. This is also essential for policy: assistance targeted only at the pre-war locality may not correspond to where returnees actually settle.

5.6 Gendered immobility and intra-household heterogeneity

Women's lower employment rate, stronger reported ties to Egypt, and exclusive presence in the undecided category suggest that mobility is gendered. Yet the survey interviews one adult per household, so it cannot establish the distribution of preferences among spouses or generations. A next-wave design should interview adult household members separately where safe, allowing researchers to examine bargaining, caregiving, and divergent risk perceptions directly.

6. Policy Implications: Dignified Stay, Dignified Exit, Sustainable Return

6.1 Dignified stay while a decision is pending

- Publish clear, updated and decentralized information on asylum registration, residence documentation and transitional arrangements under Law No. 164/2024 and Decree No. 1568/2026.
- Reduce periods in which applicants awaiting renewal are exposed to administrative uncertainty and provide accessible review or appeal mechanisms for adverse decisions.
- Expand legal information and counselling access outside Greater Cairo, including remote or periodic service provision in Damietta.
- Treat schooling and higher education as core protection issues, with transparent enrolment rules, targeted fee support and continuity measures for children and university students. In particular, support Syrian refugees in Egyptian universities with a similar reduction of fees as Sudanese and Palestinians
- Support skills recognition, formalization pathways and women's access to livelihoods beyond the male-dominated furniture niche.
- Facilitate residency and acquisition of nationality for those married to Egyptians, or having Egyptian children.

6.2 Dignified exit from Egypt

- Simplify and coordinate UNHCR case-closure and Egyptian departure procedures, especially for families whose members make different return choices.
- Provide clear information on documentary requirements, timelines, fees and options for those without a currently valid passport or residence document.

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- Minimize the need for repeated travel to Cairo-based offices; where feasible, create departure-document service points or coordinated procedures at relevant exit points.
 - Allow families with school-age children to plan departure around the academic calendar rather than forcing mid-year interruption.
 - Ensure that enforcement measures do not substitute for orderly administrative processing where applications or renewals are pending.
 - For the Syrian authorities in Egypt, facilitate and reduce the costs of newborn registration, passport renewal, and other formalities for Syrian refugees.

6.3 Sustainable return and reintegration in Syria

- Prioritize temporary and transitional housing in addition to reconstruction of destroyed homes, since many returnees will not return directly to their original locality.
- Reduce or subsidize the cost of essential civil, travel, and educational documents for returnees with limited resources.
- Create transparent school and university re-entry procedures and recognition of studies completed in Egypt.
- Link livelihood support to the actual locality of post-return settlement, not only the pre-war place of origin.
- Track housing, employment, education and onward mobility after return so that “number of returns” is not treated as a sufficient measure of reintegration success.

6.4 European Union, donors and research institutions

- Fund a “stay with dignity / return with dignity” approach in which support does not create artificial pressure toward one option.
- Support longitudinal follow-up of the Damietta sample, including actual return, place of return, secondary movement and re-migration.
- Integrate the Damietta household survey with the qualitative CMRS/EHUB evidence for Cairo, Alexandria and Damietta to build a mixed-method comparative evidence base.
- Support secondary-city research, where institutional access and labour-market structures differ from capital-city settings.

7. Conclusion

Damietta was not simply a convenient field site: social networks and occupational matching appear to have shaped settlement, particularly for refugees from furniture-producing localities in Rural Damascus. It also shows that return cannot be reduced to the single statistic that 60% intend to go

back. Many respondents assess Syria negatively, lack housing, jobs and revenue there, face education-related ties in Egypt, and do not expect to return to their original locality.

Five propositions emerge. First, secondary-city settlement can reflect sectoral place matching between pre-displacement skills and local production clusters. Second, return intentions can be generated by a double constraint in which conditions of stay deteriorate while reintegration capacity remains weak. Third, administrative friction is itself a mobility cost. Fourth, education creates temporal anchoring and path dependence. Fifth, return to a country is not necessarily return to a home locality; internal relocation and secondary displacement must be part of the analytical framework.

The policy implication is correspondingly precise: the objective should not be to maximize either local integration or return numbers, but to expand the range of viable choices. A dignified stay requires legal predictability, affordable access to education and livelihoods, and freedom from arbitrary insecurity. A dignified departure requires administratively feasible procedures that do not exhaust household resources. Sustainable return requires housing, livelihood, documentation, schooling and local services in the place where people actually resettle. Longitudinal research is necessary to determine whether stated intentions become durable outcomes.

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